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SUBJECT: DART ASSESSMENT OF AL KUT

SUMMARY

1. DART Field Team South visited Al Kut from 20 to 22 May and participated in three assistance coordination meetings that regularly take place in the city. The meetings provided an overview of the issues and needs currently being addressed in Wasit Governorate by Coalition forces, local Iraqi leadership, and NGOs. The visit also highlighted a critical issue for continued reconstruction efforts at the Governorate level in Iraq. End Summary.

PRIORITY RESTORATION OF ELECTRICITY

2. The Coalition Civil Affairs Commander described restoration of electrical power in Wasit Governorate as the most pressing problem. The goal is to meet an estimated Governorate need of 172 megawatts (MW). To date, the Governorate only receives 75 MW. Electricity is being acquired through coordination with other regional producers (e.g., 50 MW from An Nasiriyah, 15 to 20 MW from Baghdad, etc.). There have been difficulties, however, with facilities in Baghdad not providing the promised amount of power and unscheduled shut downs affecting other utilities. Work continues on restoring 132 regional power lines and repairing damaged towers.

AGRICULTURE

3. The Coalition Civil Affairs Commander said the purchase of locally produced wheat is the region's second largest problem. Under the previous regime, the government purchased locally grown wheat that was included in food rations distributed to the public. At the town council meeting, the Commander expressed the need for the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) to consider the intricacies of wheat procurement and the immediacy of the problem. (Comment: The impact of the wheat purchase decision will be felt immediately in the south, where the DART observed farmers harvesting throughout the region. End Comment.)

4. Last year's crop remains stored in silos but is unusable due to mold. The Commander said the old stock needs to be destroyed and policy and procedures established for purchase of the new crop. There was also considerable discussion in the town council meeting about the need to stop the slaughter of animals inside the market, to re-open the slaughterhouses outside the city limits, and to put meat inspectors back to work. Another priority will be to procure fertilizer for the yellow corn crop but the Basrah fertilizer plant is reportedly not operating due to insecurity and damage.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

5. The Coalition obtained Defense Department funding to help the town council purchase telephones for key agencies, including the traffic police and court offices. Four hundred and fifty telephone lines have been restored and work continues on the installation of a new central switchboard. Phones are being installed in all the schools to ensure emergency response capacity. Several billion Iraqi dinars are reported to be in the telecommunications accounts. It appears the money is in the Governorate Ministry

of Telecommunications accounts because the Coalition and local treasury personnel are assessing the actual amounts.

16. The Coalition, using money from seized government bank accounts, has begun the payment of April salaries to thousands of civil servants. The Civil Affairs team is overseeing the inspection of bank vaults to determine the available cash in the city.

FIRE DEPARTMENT

17. Al Kut's fire department responded to its first fire since the war ended, and the overall assessment was that the response was a success. The designated Coalition Civil Affairs officer (who is also a volunteer fireman in his hometown in the United States) noted the department is hampered by a lack of radio communications equipment and protective gear. The officer said he is pursuing an idea to have fire departments in the United States adopt a Governorate's fire department and to provide it with financial and technical support. But he said one looming problem is the cost of transporting donated equipment and supplies.

FUEL SUPPLIES

18. Baghdad refineries, the usual source for all fuel in the Governorate, continue to operate at less than 50 percent capacity. Coordination of fuel distribution remains a major problem. Propane trucks were sent to Basrah to acquire propane gas and were filled but were diverted to Baghdad. Meanwhile, the Coalition and local oil industry representatives continue to inspect existing gas lines. Key pipelines from An Nasiriyah, for diesel, gas and, propane, have been damaged and repairs may take more than a month to complete. Long lines of drivers waiting at gas stations have largely disappeared, however, and one reason for the change is the sale of gasoline on the black market. Apparently, some vendors have tapped into a gas line that was full, but abandoned during the Iran-Iraq war. The fuel is over 10 years old and of very poor quality.

HEALTH CARE

19. The Director of Al Kut's Health Department noted receipt of USD 10,000's worth of medicines and supplies from the International Medical Corps (IMC) that are being distributed free of charge in the area's hospitals. The scarcity of chronic care drugs, for the treatment of cancer and other diseases, however, remains a problem, and some people are resorting to the purchase of medicines on the black market. The Director praised the DART for the recent signing of an agreement with IMC for the rehabilitation of the Governorate's Public Health Office.

110. He said there is a continuing problem with the limited supply of oxygen and raised the possibility of making repairs to the local oxygen bottling plant to produce enough containers to supply the area's hospitals' needs. (Note: The DART, the Health Director, Civil Affairs Medical Liaison officers, and IMC later met with the plant director and a plan was put in place to find the necessary spare parts for his equipment to enable his facility to meet the hospitals' needs. It was estimated that the hospitals need an average of 140 bottles of oxygen a day. End Note.)

EDUCATION

111. A contribution of USD 150,000 (source unknown) was distributed to local headmasters for the purchase of school supplies. An election is also underway to determine the university leadership. There were lengthy discussions in the city council meeting about final exams, and some students have protested the cancellation of the school year. The Coalition Civil Affairs Group Commander had received a request from a group of 12th graders asking for a delay in the final testing, coupled with an extended period of assistance from teachers for study and test preparation. The Commander supported this approach, calling on the school administrators to use local television to advertise the schedule for the exams' preparation.

112. The Director of Education was confronted by one of the Civil Affairs staff over reports that children from internally displaced persons (IDPs) were not being allowed to attend school. The Director said many IDP families did not have the proper documentation. The Coalition Civil Affairs Group Commander intervened, saying that paperwork

should not be an impediment to children attending school. The Commander also noted that many children are still not attending school. He stressed that the city officials have a personal responsibility to ensure that all children attend school. The Commander later met with the teachers and encouraged them to honor their commitment to educate the youths. (Back payments of teacher salaries were completed by the end of May). At the town council meeting, special thanks were given to Mercy Corps for helping to get rural schools operating again by providing USD 12,000 for the rural school bus operations.

VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

¶13. The designated Civil Affairs Officer for the social services sector is encountering severe needs. There are 4,800 families on the social welfare register, including the physically disabled, mentally handicapped, deaf, orphans, and indigents, who previously received monthly payments (ID 15K to 22K per month) and other services (including propane cooking gas), who are presently not receiving any assistance and are in dire need. Children from the orphanage are now living, more or less unassisted, in the offices of the Ministry of Social Services.

¶14. The DART met with the designated Civil Affairs officer and Ministry representatives and outlined a plan of action. The Civil Affairs officer will work with the representatives to draft a budget of immediate program needs. After the meeting, the DART asked Mercy Corps International (MCI) to meet with the officer and Ministry representatives to see whether assistance might be provided within the context of MCI's current cooperative agreement with the DART.

AL KUT ACCOUNTING

¶15. During the Town Council and Sector meetings, municipal department heads were repeatedly encouraged to complete their budgets. A Civil Affairs officer is overseeing the process of assembling the departmental budgets. Employees of the treasury and accounting departments had taken home some of the government's computers to protect the data during the war and records of payments, funds and budgets are being reassembled as these computers are being brought back to the government offices. The Civil Affairs officer is now establishing a new database to reconcile the various accounting systems.

¶16. This same officer is overseeing the inventory of all public funds in the various agencies and banks. The Health Department and other public offices that receive small payments from the public were asked to turn in surplus 250 Iraqi dinar notes for 10,000 notes to help free up the smaller denominations and to try to reverse the devaluation of the 10,000 Iraqi dinar notes.

WATER AND SANITATION

¶17. The town council praised the city's sanitation workers for their work. Garbage trucks and other vehicles have been collected from several ministries and are being used, in multiple shifts, to start carting away garbage from the city. (Note. Al Kut appeared to be one of the cleaner cities in the south, with avenues and neighborhoods largely devoid of trash. Trashcans were also seen in various areas around the city. End Note.) The town council also praised the DART and MCI for planned repairs to the city's water treatment plant, which is in need of spare parts and equipment.

CONCLUSION

¶18. An important element in rehabilitating governorate services in Wasit has been the leadership of the local Coalition Civil Affairs Group Commander. In the town council and sectoral meetings, he regularly exhorted departmental heads to get out of their offices and talk to people to find out what they think of the government's services. He has taken several early morning walks around the city to observe how offices are operating and to ask people what kind of job the government is doing. He provided ready praise for successes by Iraqi department directors and their staffs, and encouraged creative thinking where problems were encountered.

¶19. The Commander's style of management appears to be entirely new to most, if not all, of the Iraqis attending

the town council. Some appeared mystified; others were confused. The enthusiasm of many others, however, was clear. The Coalition Civil Affairs Group was ending its period of responsibility in Al Kut in late May. Another Civil Affairs team is phasing in as the current team departs. The new Civil Affairs team will have large shoes to fill and will need to show, through a steady turnover of management responsibility to the local Iraqi government, that the Coalition is committed to allowing Iraqis to govern themselves in a newly free and transparent system.

JONES